

Embodying Vocal Nothingness

Elisabeth Belgrano: "Lasciatemi morire" o *farò "La Finta Pazzo": Embodying Vocal Nothingness on Stage in Italian and French 17th century Operatic Laments and Mad Scenes*. Diss., Högskolan för scen och musik, Göteborg, 2011 (ArtMonitor XXV), 263 p. + DVD. ISBN 978-91-978477-4-2

The relationship between performance and research, or more precisely, the evaluation of performance as research, has often been problematic for universities and conservatoires. There is a growing awareness in the twenty-first century that if performance (rather than some more abstract semiotic representation of it) is the music, then practice-based programmes should be able to identify research elements that contribute to the artistic endeavour. In the UK we increasingly find students studying for doctorates by preparing recitals and supporting the practical work with written documentation (assumed to be the research element) – a little like a less highly-taught version of the American Doctor of Musical Arts. But can performance itself actually constitute research? On the face of it, the two disciplines are fundamentally different: research is objective, minutely quantifiable, and is usually presented in forms that we've been familiar with for a very long time. Performance, though it may be supported by objective processes, is ultimately subjective, and we wouldn't want it any other way. The successful outcome of research is measured by peer review, a judgement by experts in the field. A performance in the real world stands or falls by the reaction of the audience, who may know nothing of the music itself and the processes the performer has gone through in order to realise it. As Susan Hellaur of the American vocal group Anonymous 4

memorably put it: "You can't sing a footnote".

Elisabeth Belgrano's doctoral presentation, described as "a music research drama thesis", is an attempt to conflate these two disciplines in a work that is academically coherent and meaningful, but stands alone as work of artistic expression, in which the two disciplines are inextricably bound up with each other, each strand dependent on the other. It takes the form of a text and a film which document the internal intellectual, psychological, musical, vocal and dramatic processes which a singer goes through in order to realise a performance. The textual and visual documentation are in two parts: the libretto and its realisation (on the accompanying DVD), and the "Cannocchiale" which the author describes as "a pair of theatre binoculars, aiming to clarify, highlight, and describe the content of the libretto to the reader, or even possibly confusing him or her". It is in the Cannocchiale that the key 17th century concepts that underpin the author's intellectual framework are explored: the concept of pure voice, the idea of nothingness and its French equivalent, the *je-ne-sois-quoi*. This is a bold strategy, requiring the reader to enter into the creative process and, in a sense, to complete it.

"Pure voice" (also described as "over-vocalizing") is, in essence, that element of a vocal performance expressed in ornamentation rather than by delivering a text, a key issue in music composed before the mid-19th century. Elisabeth Belgrano takes as her starting point Mauro Calceagno's 2003 article "Signifying Nothing: On the Aesthetics of Pure Voice in Early Venetian Opera" (*Journal of Musicology* XXIV, 2003), applying his insights to music by Monteverdi. Following on from this there is a discourse on slightly later French music informed by the related concept of *je-ne-sois-quoi* (for which, see Richard Scholier's 2005 publication "The *je-ne-sois-quoi* in Early

Modern Europe", OUP, 2005). The function of these 17th century conceits in the context of the thesis is to explain the basic artistic impulse, particularly the abstract expression of emotion that may or may not be dependent on using words, liberating performance from both score and text. Scholars may feel that Belgrano's engagement with these concepts is sometimes not quite what her sources would imply, but the concepts themselves are opaque and elusive, and she is perfectly justified in adapting her definitions to fit the nexus

between academic judgement and her artistic aims. These two entities are further elaborated by her embodying the thesis in herself (or is it vice versa?) right from the start: the Singer (as she refers to herself) enters into a dialogue with her sources, often simultaneously with the music itself, and also with two eighteenth century singers from whom she draws inspiration and support. These are not Socratic dialogues designed to reveal a truth in small increments, but a multi-layered poetic exploration of the nature of text, drama and music, which at the same time provides the necessary academic apparatus in a far more creative way than a more conventional literature review would do, should we want to approach it with academic objectivity.

The work as a whole is perforce a very personal and intimate documentary, revealing the often apparently chaotic process of artistic creation and interpretation as it coalesces into those artistic truths that will inform the performance itself. There is a very high level of detail in the text, which seems altogether more expansive when seen on the screen; academic objectivity is satisfied, but you have to engage with the material on a subjective level in order to find it. It is an astonishing, high risk *tour de force*, not always comfortable to watch or read, and which in a less creative academic environment might have seemed

incomprehensible. But as an example of how a multimedia performance/research project (we don't yet have a vocabulary to describe the process adequately...) can flourish in the form of a doctoral presentation, Elisabeth Belgrano's work is a beacon that will illuminate the path for a future generation of highly creative intelligent performers.

John Porter

Abraham från Godegård

Peter Berry: *Abraham från Godegård: Berättelser om en originell människa och hans musik*. Malmö: Lunds universitet, Musikhögskolan i Malmö, 2011 (ForMulär II), 178 s., ill. ISBN 978-91979584-3-1

Den 16 oktober 2011 var det 200 år sedan den blivande folkskolläraren och sockenbibliotekarien Abraham Jansson (1811–1890) föddes på torpet Hagen i Godegårds socken i nordvästra hörnet av Östergötland. Jansson, som senare skulle ta sig efternamnet Hagholm, är idag mest känd för att han efterlämnat en notbok innehållande flera hundra folkliga flöjtlåtar av vilka 189 kom att publiceras i *Svenska låtar*, Östergötlands första del. Notboken ingår i Folkmusikkommissionens material som finns på Svenskt visarkiv där den har beteckningen M 26 och kan nås i digitaliserad version via: www.smus.se/earkv/fmk

Hagholms sentida kollegor, musikbibliotekarien på Musikhögskolan i Malmö och spelmannen Peter Berry, har tagit sig an att beskriva denne märklige mans levnadsöde och verk i en nyligen utkommen bok. Folkmusikforskningen har med tiden skiftat fokus från att kollektivt skildra traditioner till att istället ägna sig åt de individuella utförarna och deras kontext. Peter Berrys Hagholmsbok är ett bra exempel på det senare. Boken ingår i skriftserien ForMulär